

# Small towns go high-tech: User-friendly Web sites are a blessing for residents

By Bernie Smith

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The Internet has profoundly changed the way society functions, putting a nearly limitless stream of information at the fingertips of even the most technophobic.

Since the turn of the millennium, town halls have been getting into the game, even in the nation's smaller communities.

While larger cities offer — and will likely continue to offer — its residents the most versatility and options online, a local expert says smaller towns are narrowing the gap, offering constituents more and more choices.

Charles Kaylor, president of Public Sphere Information Group, a consulting firm that focuses on the use of digital technologies by public entities, said Milford-area towns have made great leaps since his organization last looked at Massachusetts towns' Web sites three years ago.

In 2003, PSI Group examined the Web sites of all 351 Massachusetts communities, to the extent they had a presence on the Web, and ranked them using a formula that took into account 72 factors, from user-friendliness and navigability to the range and extent of services offered.

Last month, Kaylor reexamined 12 of those sites, for the towns of Millis, Medway, Franklin, Bellingham, Milford, Hopedale, Mendon, Upton, Blackstone, Millville, Northbridge and Uxbridge, and compared them to what he had seen three years earlier.

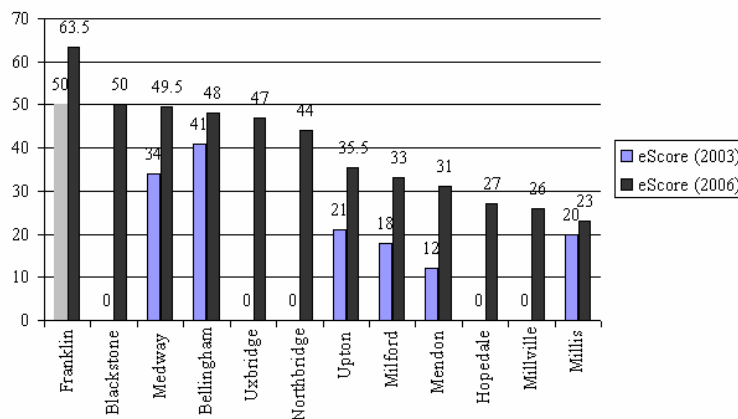
## Results of Survey of Selected Municipal Websites

Public Sphere Information Group  
(www.psigroup.biz)

Comparison of Selected Municipal Website

Town	eScore ('03)	eScore ('06)
<a href="#">Franklin</a>	50	63.5
<a href="#">Blackstone</a>	0	50
<a href="#">Medway</a>	34	49.5
<a href="#">Bellingham</a>	41	48
<a href="#">Uxbridge</a>	0	47
<a href="#">Northbridge</a>	0	44
<a href="#">Upton</a>	21	35.5
<a href="#">Milford</a>	18	33
<a href="#">Mendon</a>	12	31
<a href="#">Hopedale</a>	0	27
<a href="#">Millville</a>	0	26
<a href="#">Millis</a>	20	23

Note: an eScore of 0 indicates either no official municipal site existed in 2003 or the official site was not available when the survey was conducted.



“They’ve all shown marked improvements since our previous study,” Kaylor said. “I’d say, that said, there is sort of a disaggregation, from having information deployed through (town) departments to thinking more broadly about the mission of city government. But none of them have gotten completely away from deploying information and services through city departments.”

Kaylor said many municipal Web sites often make the mistake of organizing the information on the site the same way town hall itself is organized: by departments.

For instance, a new resident who wanted to find out when garbage is collected would need to know that service is handled by the Public Works Department, and look on that department's page to find the information.

On the downside, for people not familiar with the way town governments are organized, finding specific pieces of information like that can be difficult.

Instead, Kaylor said those who build town Web sites should design them with residents in mind, not town administrators.

Information on town services should be easy to find. If a town offers the option of paying bills online, residents should be able to pay all their bills on one page — instead of having to pay property taxes, excise taxes and water and sewer bills on different pages.

Reviewing Milford-area Web sites, Kaylor said more and more are becoming user-friendly, with more of a focus on the services residents want.

Bellingham's Web site recently underwent a "facelift," as Web master Karen Jasinski called it, designed to make the site more user-friendly.

"I think it was time," Jasinski said. "I just think it's easier to find information. It's easier to move around in."

Jasinski said she has received positive feedback from residents, about two e-mails a week, usually in the form of compliments, sometimes with a helpful suggestion of some new feature to add in the future.

Kaylor said that's not uncommon. Town Web masters are becoming more responsive to the public's wishes, and tweaking the sites to add more features.

"Smaller communities are figuring out ways of using the (power of the) Web and doing it creatively. In particular, governments that have town meeting or rely heavily on volunteerism, they're figuring out ways to inform people about volunteer opportunities and warrants on town meetings," Kaylor said. "Franklin is doing that really well. Northbridge is also doing a good job, making people aware of opportunities to participate."

Les Barnes, who runs and helped create Franklin's Web site in the 1990s, said the site's bulletin boards are particularly popular, connecting residents with one another for everything from volunteer opportunities, to selling old mattresses and used cars to teenagers advertising availability to work summer jobs.

To protect any untoward elements taking advantage of the site, Barnes said he has to approve all entries before they are posted.

"Once they are posted, they may be modified, but I get a real-time copy of the change, so an ad for a used book (that is) changed to pornography...would not last long," Barnes said, adding, "we've never had anything like that happen."

Barnes said the Franklin Web site has grown to more than 6,000 pages, and many new developments are in the works, including a series of self-help articles and a scrolling box to appear on the site's front page that lists all the site's newest updates.

Kaylor said additions such as these are no longer uncommon to small towns' Web sites. He said there is a trickle-down phenomenon occurring, where large cities that can afford an IT staff, are implementing new technologies that are valuable to their residents. As those technologies become cheaper and more manageable, smaller communities begin to adopt them.

For instance, currently there are two services which are starting to trickle down to small municipal Web sites: using geographic information systems and designing Web pages for dynamic content.

At its essence, geographic information systems are a tool that allows users to take a map of a given area and add certain types of information onto it.

Many communities have been using a limited version of GIS for years, as an assessor's tool. Web users can search for a specific property in town and learn its size, assessed value and most recent sale price.

"If you're looking to buy a home or move to the area, with the assessor's map you can get a lot of information on the houses for sale and get a pretty good feel on the area pretty quickly, before you drive out," said Joe Bonapace, who runs Uxbridge's Web site.

Like bigger cities, some towns are expanding their use of GIS. In Franklin, residents can use GIS to find information on current street construction projects or what zoning laws apply to the houses on their street.

Another change Kaylor said smaller Web sites are adopting is designing them to be content dynamic — creating the Web site so new information can be posted and old information withdrawn in a regular fashion.

In particular, he said Millis and Franklin have done a good job of incorporating these functions. Although Millis scored poorly compared to its neighbors, he said the site's underlying infrastructure is capable of handling a large amount of information, and sorting it, so that residents can find relevant information quicker.

Millis Town Administrator Charles Aspinwall said the Web site was changed about a year and a half ago, by a firm that was willing to design it at a competitive price.

The town chose a “decentralized site, where each department can add and change things relative to their own operation,” Aspinwall said. “Being a small town, we don't have a lot of staff...We couldn't operate with a centralized Web site where one department is responsible for operating the entire site.”

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